



Empowering Parents To Raise Their Children To Be Substance-Free

Talk early and often about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Even when it gets tough.

Start Talking! 
Building a Drug-Free Future



Click here to print a PDF of this article so you can start a conversation with your child

Talking regularly with youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs reduces their risk of using in the first place.

Know! encourages you to share this Parent Tip with friends and family.

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Know! Social Anxiety Increases Substance Abuse Risk

Many adults are known to drink alcohol at social functions to “loosen up” and feel more comfortable interacting with others. Well guess what? Many of our teens are doing the exact same thing. It is often referred to as “liquid courage,” because after a few drinks, a person may no longer feel afraid to get out there and dance, to ask out a love interest or to simply chat with their peers.

So then the question becomes: Is a person with social anxiety at higher risk for substance abuse? Absolutely. In fact, young people who suffer with Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) are at greater risk for developing depression by the age of 15 and developing substance abuse by the age of 16 or 17.

It is very important, however, not to confuse normal teenage shyness with SAD. There are key differences. Being shy, by one definition, is being reserved or having or showing nervousness or timidity in the company of other people. This may be a teen walking into a social gathering and feeling a little uneasy at first – not unusual. SAD, on the other hand, would be a teen so overwhelmed with nervousness and self-consciousness that he/she would do everything they could to avoid going to that party.

Symptoms of SAD, on average, begin to show around the age of 13. However, some children as young as three or four are known to display signs of this sometimes debilitating condition. It may begin with a child trying to avoid being called on in class, not because he or she doesn’t know the answer, but out of fear of having to speak. As the anxiety builds, the child may pull away from friends and drop out of the extra-curricular activities that they once truly enjoyed. School performance may take a sudden dive. Worse yet, the child may try to avoid school altogether and may begin exhibiting signs of depression. It is at this point where it becomes common for teens to turn to alcohol and drink excessively to cope with or try to escape from the symptoms – a temporary “fix” that in the end, only adds to a person’s depression, anxiety and irritability.

Social Anxiety Disorder is considered a “silent disorder” because many times, it will take years before a child is diagnosed, if ever. Due to the nature of the disorder, these children avoid drawing attention to themselves. They tend to be compliant at home and school and they become very good at slipping into the background unnoticed.



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What can parents do?

Parents play an essential role in identifying the signs and symptoms of SAD, and stepping in before the disorder gets out of control. Experts from the Columbia University Medical Center share the following questions to highlight some of the warning signs of social anxiety disorder:

- Is your child uncomfortable speaking to teachers or peers?
- Does he or she avoid eye contact, mumble or speak quietly when addressed by other people?
- Does your son or daughter blush or tremble around other people?
- Does your child worry excessively about doing or saying something "stupid"?
- Does your child complain of stomachaches and want to stay home from school, field trips or parties?
- Is he or she withdrawing from activities and wanting to spend more time at home?

If you observe these signs in your child, he or she may have SAD, and may be at greater risk for substance abuse. You are encouraged to reach out to a doctor or mental health professional to determine if a social anxiety disorder is present, and if so, he or she can provide your child with healthy ways to manage and cope with their disorder, leading to a much happier and more fulfilling road ahead.

For more information visit: [National Institute of Mental Health](http://NationalInstituteofMentalHealth.gov).

Sources: [Anxiety and Depression Association of America: Social Anxiety Disorder and Alcohol Abuse](#). [Care for Your Mind: Anne Marie Albano, Ph.D.](#). [Columbia University Medical Center: When Young People Suffer Social Anxiety Disorder: What Parents Can Do](#). [National Institute of Mental Health: National Survey Dispels Notion that Social Phobia is the Same as Shyness, 2011](#). [Oxford Dictionaries: Shy](#).

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